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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

SOME ACCOUNT OF GESSO DURO.



THE revival of gesso duro as a material for decorative art has roused so much interest, that a short history of it, and the purposes for which it has and can be used, may not be unacceptable to our readers, more especially those whose artistic eye and hand will enable them to embellish at a trifling cost, and with material easily procurable, suitable portions of their homes and furniture, which would otherwise have but a very plain unvarnished tale to tell. It may be as well, in the first instance, to point out the difference between stucco and gesso duro, as gesso, burnt gypsum, or plaster of Paris is used in both. Vetrivius, a celebrated architect, who lived in the time of Cæsar Augustus, gives a recipe for stucco for painting upon, consisting

of slaked lime or gypsum (plaster of Paris), these were to be mixed with water, and he especially insists upon the materials being well soaked, and for a long time, in order that the burning properties in the lime might not injure the pigments. The ancient Romans were great in stucco work, but they were not the first to use it. Soaked lime dates back to very early times. The highly decorated mummy cases of the Egyptians were made of linen, saturated with acacia gum, and moulded into form, which, when dry, becomes exceedingly hard, forming a thin shell, which was afterwards primed inside and out with soaked lime; this formed the white ground upon which the design was drawn, and the coloring and gilding filled in as we see it. The colors would not all have retained their pristine brilliancy had the lime or plaster not been carefully washed previously.

The use of stucco was not limited to the subordinate part of grounding, for about the time of the second century, A.D., gesso was employed for ornamentation, as we find borders composed of it, and having a continuous design, placed round the portraits on the wooden coffins containing mummies from Fayum. Stucco, however, reached its perfection at a much later period, and the Villa Madama at Rome is a proof of the great beauty to which this great work can attain. It was designed by Julio Romano, who executed the paintings; while the reliefs are doubtless the work of Giovanni da Udine, a noted craftsman in stucco of that time, who assisted him. In more recent times the ceilings of many houses of the last century form attractive specimens of stucco. They are the work of a colony of Italian artists settled in London, and who traveled into the country as their services were required. Indeed, Italians appear to have inherited a transmitted adaptability for this work, as have the Venetians for glass blowing.

Gesso duro has the same basis as stucco, namely, gypsum, or plaster of Paris, but it is mixed with glue or size added while warm and in a liquid state. It is with this preparation that decorative works of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries were made; and Cermi-

PANEL—Gilt and Painted Gesso. From the Arts and Crafts Exhibition.

no Cermini, who lived in the fourteenth century, has handed

down to us much valuable information upon the arts of that time, in a treatise which is the most complete work of the kind of his day. And I cannot do better than give in an abridged form some of his recipes, more especially as his instructions apply equally to modern work. There is a quaint cookery book flavor about them which is amusing; but Italians are born cooks. He begins by giving directions for preparing wood paneling with strong glue made of parchment; for making which he also gives directions, which need not be repeated, as it can now be had readymade; but his test for its consistency is useful—it must stick the hands together. The panel was to be made level by having knots cut down and holes stopped, and a coat of parchment size having been spread over it, he continues: "Get some linen cloth, old, fine, white, and free from grease; take your best [strongest] glue, cut or tear the linen into large and small strips, soak them in the glue, and spread them with your hands over the surface of the panel, leave it to dry for two or three days; when very dry, rasp it well. Then take some gesso grosso [ordinary plaster of Paris], sifted like flour, put a porringer full on the prophry slab, and grind it well with this glue as you would colors [that is, with a muller], collect it, and put it on the surface of the pictures [panels] with a large spatula, then take some of this ground plaster, warm it; by this time the glue will have chilled, and materials mixed with size should be used warm. Take a soft hoghair pencil, give a coat over the cornices and foliage on the even surfaces with the spatula. Procure some small iron rods, and with these pick out all the cornices and foliage which are not flat." But he has written nothing about the cornices and foliage being already raised upon the panel. Previous to priming, therefore we must look further through his book for information, and, passing over several recipes, we come to what we are in search of, and find that the raised work was done in two different ways, the first by making the prominent parts of plaster of Paris and glue on the panel before priming, which was then to be passed over the whole, clearing up the design after each coat, and giving two coats of gesso sottile, or fine plaster, to finish with, and this is the method he is describing. The recipe for making the fine plaster follows, and is interesting, repeating as it does almost the words of Vetrivius: "You must now prepare a plaster for fine grounds, called gesso sottile. This is made from the same plaster [of Paris] as the first (gesso grosso), but it must be well washed (purgata), and kept moist in a tub for at least a month, until it almost rots (marcise), and is completely slaked; it will become as soft as silk; throw away the water, make it into cakes, and let it dry. This plaster is sold by our apothecaries to our painters. It is used for gilding and



DAWN—Decorative Panel in Gesso, by Mrs. C. Wylie.

and working in relief." The next recipe gives the finishing process: "Having laid on the gesso grosso, rub down the surface and polish it well; put some cakes of gesso sottile into a pipkin of cold water, let them absorb as much as they will. Put a small portion at a time on the slab and grind it, without adding any more water, and when you have sufficient put it on a piece of linen cloth, strong and white [evidently to drain]. Take some of the same glue with which you tempered the gesso grosso, take a new glazed pipkin, take a cake of the damped gesso [it was, no doubt, made into cakes after grinding], scrape it fine with a knife as you would cheese into the pipkin; put some of the glue on to it [this must have been warm], stir the gesso as you would paste for making fritters, smoothly and evenly, until there are no lumps in it. Procure a cauldron of water [the bain-marie of the period], put into it the pipkin of gesso, thus it will become warm without boiling; when warm, take up a proper quantity of the gesso with a soft hogs' bristle pencil, neither too much nor too little, and spread it evenly over the level surfaces, the cornices, and the foliage. The first coat should be spread and rubbed in as much as possible with the hand and fingers, to incorporate it with the gesso grosso. When you have done this spread again with the brush without touching with the hand, let it rest a little, but not to dry thoroughly; then pass over a third time with the brush, and let it dry as usual. Then give a coat on the other side; in this manner, keeping the gesso warm, give eight coats. Foliage and relievos require less." This

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completes the first method, and we proceed to the second. "How to prepare grounds of gesso sottile.—You may first, as I formerly directed you, pass glue three or four times over the panel, and all small and delicate works, give as many coats as from experience you find them require." He says nothing of the strips of linen being glued down. For small panels and delicate work it was not necessary; but up to a much later date pictures were painted upon linen, glued in one piece on to the wood, and in the cassone of the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries the chests were always covered with linen cloth, then primed with the gesso. The linen may be seen at the broken edges of the chests, and it serves to distinguish them at once from the chests of carved wood. There are fine examples of these cassone at the South Kensington Museum. When no gesso grosso was used, the size was made thinner. He notices that "there are some persons who grind gesso sottile with water and



POET AND PEGASUS.
Panel in Gesso, by Walter Crane.

glue." That is water was added to the glue used in preparing gesso grosso, and, the gesso sottile having been soaked as well, the preparation became weaker. He approves of this, writing, "It is proper for grounds where no gesso grosso is used," and also that it should be more diluted for raising works in relief. The panel being properly prepared, the design was sketched in, in ink on the flat portions, while those which were to be gilt were outlined with a needle fixed in a piece of wood; the indented line would thus show through the gold. Fringes, borderings,

cornices, foliage were now to be raised with the gesso sottile; a little bole being mixed with it, possibly to prevent any minute defects in the gilding showing, and to make the gesso a stronger mordant. He now returns to the raised work. "Having the gesso in a vase upon hot ashes, and another vase of hot water, because you must wash your pencil frequently, and this pencil must be of miniver, the hair fine and long, take a little of the gesso on the point of the pencil, and with it raise what figures you wish to make in relief. If you make any foliage, draw the design previously, and be careful not to relieve too much. The clearer you make the foliage, the better will you be able to make the design." He does not consider it advantageous to pass two or more coats over the whole surface of the picture, level and raised parts alike; though he says "some masters do so."

It is at this stage of the process that the imitation gems of colored glass were introduced, such as are to be seen in the works of Crivelli and other artists of the fifteenth century, and approximating that time. In the large altar-piece, by Crivelli, in the National Gallery, the crown of the Madonna and the band round the dress are enriched with these jewels. In one of the panels to the left is the figure of St. Peter, in which the work is raised to an unusual extent; the keys are as large as good sized door keys, and are hung by real string coated with gesso, while the cord round the cope is in very high relief. I am inclined to believe both are casts in gesso duro, as Cennini gives a recipe for making and fixing them to pictures, and the termination of the cords, which would end abruptly in casts, have been shaved down from above to the level of the panel; whereas, had they been painted on, they could have been gradually fined down without losing the design of the strands. The figures in this masterpiece are painted in tempera on the flat, the amphories alone being raised. There is another example of this period amongst the works of the Tuscan school which is very beautiful.

The subject is the Madonna and Child, with St. John and an Angel; this is on a round panel of sufficient size to permit of a broad border in gesso duro surrounding the figures in lieu of a frame. The border, together with the background, which is thickly beaded over with gesso, is gilt; the beads produce a scintillating effect, which, combined with the tender yet brilliant coloring, is perfectly charming. The figures are painted in tempera on the flat, a method which is preferable, to my mind, to raising the whole field of the figure and then painting on the features and detail, as is still done by the Chinese in their lacquer work. Artists did not always execute the raised work themselves, but employed brother artists or assistants, who made a specialty of modeling in gesso; and thus it comes to pass that the early work of Donatello is sometimes found upon pictures of very inferior merit.

Gradually, however, in the sixteenth century, and quickly following one upon another, giants in art arose, whose grand works needed not the attractiveness of gold and gesso work, and the use of both was discontinued in pictures, the gold lingering only in light touches upon fringes or borderings of garments, as we see it used by Perugino and others, while Titian and the

greatest artists dispensed with it altogether. But for modeling, gesso duro held its own in Italy, and in the fifteenth century it was used extensively for large decorative works upon the occasion of national festivals; in these cases, tow or chopped straw was added, to bind it together. Another instance of its usefulness is to be found in the celebrated panel picture by Van Eyck, now in the National Gallery, representing the marriage of Jean Arnolfini with Jeanne de Chenañy, 1434, which was an application of tow, glue, and plaster at the back, this being painted over with a black preparation, doubtless containing pitch. This picture is in perfect preservation, the wood neither worm-eaten nor warped, and is a striking proof that Cennini's recommendation of priming a panel on both sides is not to be disregarded.

It is strange that so convenient a material should have been altogether ignored in England, which for modeling on a large scale, and especially for works to be cast in metal, offers decided advantages.

So far back as 1859, triumphal arches and allegorical figures were constructed in Florence by Signor Fabrucci upon the entering of King Victor Emmanuel into that city, but it was not till 1886—when Mr. G. F. Watts, the R.A., was commissioned by the Duke of Westminster to execute a colossal statue in bronze of Hugh Lupus—that the almost insuperable difficulties of contending with such large masses of wet clay presented themselves, and the benefit to be derived by employing the substance, brought under his notice by Signor Fabrucci, were appreciated. Gesso duro, while wet, is applied in small quantities, the tow being dipped into the plaster, made up with glue. This, when dry, is sufficiently hard to permit of its being sculptured, as stone would be, and, finally, it renders the tedious and expensive casting in plaster unnecessary, as the matrix is formed from the model direct. It is therefore to Mr. Watts—who was the first to use it—that our sculptors owe the introduction of this valuable material, and it is in his studio that the gesso duro takes its grandest form.

We come now to that which we may distinguish as fibrous gesso sottile; the washed gypsum formerly ground so laboriously by hand, is replaced by washed chalk (or whitening), the glue by parchment size, the chopped straw and tow by cotton wool, and of linseed oil one part to six of size. If this does not mix well, it must be allowed to cool and rewarmed. If the composition is required to be very hard, a small proportion of powdered resin is added. The size should be warmed by standing in "a cauldron of hot water," so as not to boil. The whitening is scraped into it with a knife, as described by Cennini. Small pieces of cotton wool are dipped into the "batter" and applied as required, and can be modeled into form as easily as clay. When set, it can be cut, or filed, or rubbed down with sandpaper. A varnish, composed of shellac dissolved in methylated spirit, is brushed over the work from time to time, which hardens and smooths it. For delicate parts of a figure, the wadding can be laid aside, and the parts raised solely by painting the gesso on with a brush. The design being completed so far, the modeling must be made as perfect as possible. If metal foil or leaf is to be used, it is now applied, and color in oil paint, lustre, or lacquer painted over it, after it has adhered firmly to the ground. Specimens of this, in imitation of the pictures of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were on view at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition. I have tried several ways of employing this plastic material, which lends itself so readily to artistic fancy and caprice, and find that, besides modeling, with the addition of powder color, it can be used as a kind of superior distemper. The latter is easily destroyed by damp, while gesso duro combined with shellac is not affected by it. Again, the ivory-white of the composition has a sufficiently good effect when applied to panels of well colored wood, such as mahogany or walnut. A few touches of gold lacquer make these decorative without any further addition of color in oil or lustre. Wooden mantelpieces of Queen Anne design will be enriched by having a center plaque and corner pieces, with a running garland between. It is not necessary to have expensive wood for this purpose, as any light-colored wood may be stained or painted to harmonize with the coloring of the room. Although a knowledge of drawing would enable anyone attempting to produce work of a higher standard, many persons have a pronounced aptitude for design, and have accustomed themselves to the constant use of pen and ink or pencil. These would find great facility in working, and would have little difficulty in arranging wreaths or sprays of foliage which would be suitable for cabinet doors or small articles, and a tracing from Flaxman's classical figures or Bartolozzi's charming groups would supply the figures for medallions, but it would be best not to attempt modeling the figures without some knowledge of the subject. It would be better to raise the field of the figure slightly, keeping sharply up to the outline, the form slightly indicated in outline, as shown in illustration. For those who have the opportunity of studying ornamentation, a visit to South Kensington will reveal a mine of wealth. They will there find Italian cassoni chests of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, besides plaques and medallions in low relief. Untold treasures lie around on all sides, and there is

nothing to prevent our artisan brothers and sisters gleaning rich harvests in these fields of art. The material for gesso duro cost but a few pence; such tools as are required can be made from a stick of firewood—a bodkin, a knitting or bonnet pin, can be made available. Children can help in the work, which is indeed art work for the multitude. Wood carving has already found its way to some humble homes, and there is no reason why it should not be accompanied by the sister craft of modeling in gesso duro.

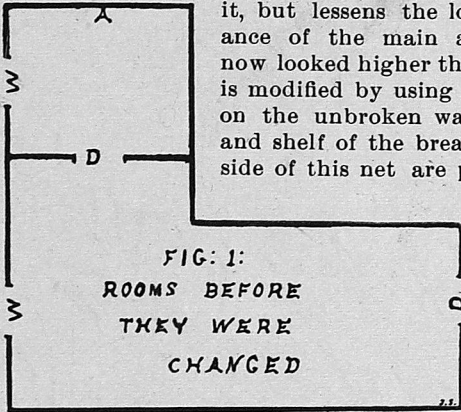
NEW ROOMS FOR OLD.

BY LUCY POLK SNELL.



NEW YORK has very many ugly rooms that could be made into beautiful apartments, if one would only take the trouble, and had the taste to accomplish the work. I found two such rooms without any trouble, in a most desirable building downtown, in a neighborhood where regular flats are scarce, dark, and I may as well add, very dear, even with all the drawbacks. Out of these rooms of which (in Fig. 1) I give a simple plan, I have made a suite of four, with a hall, and what I call a vestibule, although I fear wiser people might not give it that name.

How the work of alteration was accomplished can be readily understood if the reader will glance at the plan described in Fig. 2. The larger of the rooms is about 26 feet long by 11 feet wide, while about half way of its length three feet are added to the width, which gives a corner jutting out just where it is not wanted. At one end of this room is a door, and at the other end a window. The ceiling is nineteen and one-half feet from the floor. At the end of the room by the entrance door, I had poles fastened, nine feet from the floor, and from them suspended dark red curtains, so as to form a room eight feet square, which is marked in the sketch as a breakfast room. On the two sides of this room, which are formed by the walls of plaster, I had a shelf run just even with the poles, which was draped with silk of pink and terra cotta, shades which made a pretty effect above the red curtains. On this shelf were placed odd bits of china. In the angle formed by the two walls I had a china closet made, with doors decorated to imitate old Dutch inlaid furniture. On top of this closet are set silver and glass ware. A quaint old table and some odd chairs finish a cosy little breakfast room. There are still three feet of the width left at this end of the room, and this makes a convenient hall, while a curtain, hung



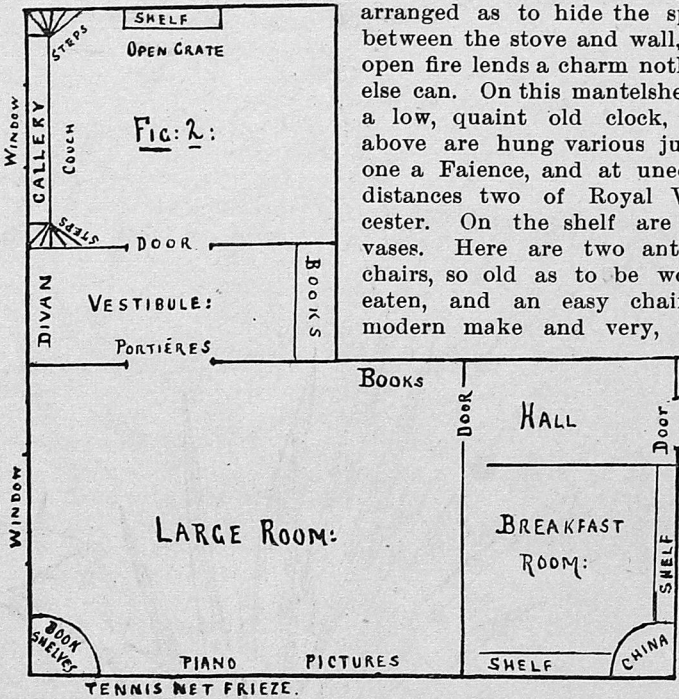
at the end opposite the door, not only hides it, but lessens the long and narrow appearance of the main apartment. The ceiling now looked higher than before, a defect which is modified by using a tennis net for a frieze on the unbroken wall as far as the curtains and shelf of the breakfast room extend. Inside of this net are placed a few tennis balls in a heap, and further on a pair of racquets are crossed, while at another point a pair of foils and gloves. A few pictures are massed, one above the other to the depth of three, on this wall, while some book shelves in the corner, and a piano help to fill the space and break the monotonous stretch. The window in the end of the room, which is deep and high, is draped at the top with curtains which harmonize with the other hangings of the room, and the unsightly woodwork at the bottom is hidden by dark red velvet against which, as a rich background, is a cast of my favorite piece of statuary.

From the angle of the jutting wall a pole springs across to the window and on it is hung a cashmere rug with fine effect. There are still three feet of pole bare. Another rug is brought into use; tied back they look very handsome, and the space between them and the door leading into the next room is what I call my vestibule. It is six feet long by three feet wide. Across one end the carpenter made a seat which I cover with a Persian rug, and on it throw a sofa pillow. An easy chair, a little stand at the other end just under some book shelves, complete the furniture of this room, which is always lighted by a colored lantern.

The door which leads into the next room is too high for beauty, so the height is lessened by a panel of carved wood which is made to fit in at the top of the door, while the lower part is draped with Mecca rugs.

The smaller of the two original rooms is about twelve by

twelve feet, so to get two rooms out of the one, I have a floor put in just half way between the floor and ceiling. The joists show beneath, but after they are stained a nice warm tint, and two old nets are stretched over them, the effect is fine. The ceiling is now too low to admit of any pictures being hung on the walls, but a few quaint old jugs take their places, or a bracket here and there with some curios on it. A shelf is fastened to the end wall, not too high up, and under this a gas stove which simulates an open fireplace of burning wood. The draperies of the shelf being so arranged as to hide the space between the stove and wall, the open fire lends a charm nothing else can. On this mantelshelf is a low, quaint old clock, and above are hung various jugs—one a Faience, and at unequal distances two of Royal Worcester. On the shelf are two vases. Here are two antique chairs, so old as to be worm-eaten, and an easy chair of modern make and very, very



comfortable indeed. Standing lamps light the room at night, and look pretty during the day time. Here and there are home-made divans, covered with rich brocades and furnished with pillows. The floor is covered with rugs.

To get to the room above, you mount a few steps in the corner and then traverse a gallery the length of the room, then mount the remaining steps. This gallery runs across the long window, the part of which below it is closed up, and under it is a couch which is hung with pretty curtains fastened to the lower part of the gallery. The rail of the gallery is of fret-work in oak. The window has two outside panels of stained and a center of plain glass. It is deep enough to admit of a seat, which is of polished wood to match the stair steps, and the upper part is draped in colors which melt in, as it were, with the stained glass; the material being silk. Some etchings look pretty at each end of the gallery, and break the otherwise bare places. The room above is a bedroom decorated with silk-oline, which is plaited from ceiling to floor, the long lines thus formed giving an odd effect of height. Some etchings and mirrors, without frames, are let in between the plaits with much effect, the tops being finished with scarfs bowed in an artistic manner, an idea I got from a chateau in France, owned and occupied by the Duchess de Chartres.

The railing which keeps one from tumbling into the gallery extends nearly to the ceiling, and is draped with lace curtains.

THE old style of corner pedestal for statuettes, vases, busts, or other articles, having concave sides rising from a square bases, is now beautifully carried out in ceramic ware, covered with leaves and stalks of different hues of brown and yellow; veins and edgings of leaves partly in relief; these replacing old time gilded metal ornaments attached to ebonized wood pedestals. A drapery of light colored soft woolen cloth resting on and overlapping the capital of the pedestal softens the transition between it and the objects exhibited.

HAVING purchased an article of furniture from some maker with whom it is an exclusive specialty, the buyers put themselves at times to much trouble and inconvenience in endeavoring to get the remaining portion of the suite in the same tone of color. Now, absolute uniformity of tone in a furniture suite is not required for good artistic effect. The sideboard, for instance, may be of one tone, the tables of another, and the chairs of a third tone in the same wood finish.

A SETTEE is so constructed as to divide automatically into three parts, each of the ends thus forming a separate easy chair and the center a sort of ottoman.